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UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.



Faith the End of Christian Teaching.

AN ADDRESS

DELIVERED BEFORE THE

North Middlesex Sunday School Convention,

AT

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BY ANDREW P. PEABODY.



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ADDRESS.

The end determines the means. Our present conference is designed for the interchange of views with regard to the religious instruction of the young. What is the end proposed? What do we wish to do for our pupils, or to make of them? This is our first question. This answered, we are prepared to consider the means.

You, my friends, desire for your pupils what you most of all desire for yourselves,—what you would deem the sure source of all that is most blessed in character and most conducive to enduring happiness. I cannot be mistaken when I say, that you would, rather than any or all things else, be strong believers. You regard faith as the prime blessing of life, God's best gift, man's most precious attribute,—faith in the Almighty as your Father, as exercising a providence always wise and benignant,—faith in his law as universal and inevitable.—faith in Christ as a divine teacher, a trustworthy promiser, an all-sufficient Saviour,—faith in heaven and the life everlasting as the goal and destiny of a worthy life on earth. To have this faith as some have had it, you would surrender all worldly advantages. You have felt the sore need of it in bereavement and in sorrow. Those of you who have passed the meridian of the earthly day, and are moving down its westward slope, feel that this is the paramount necessity of a life gravitating rapidly toward the unseen world. When you shall stand consciously on the margin of the death-river, you will be calm, happy, jubilant, or sad, wretched, despairing, in the precise proportion in which faith or scepticism as to the great realities of the spiritual life predominates in your minds; and in the cavils which some of you perhaps are over-ready to entertain, in the loose notions to which you perhaps accord and for which you claim the hospitality of an open ear and an indulgent heart, you are prepar-

ing deeper shadows for the dark days that are before you, and thorns for your death-pillows.

Now what you would thus crave for yourselves, you must needs regard as desirable beyond all things else for your children and pupils. For faith and character are to each other as cause and effect. We are what we believe with the whole heart and soul and mind. The reason why, with us adults, there is often so wide a discrepancy between our professed faith and our characters is, that we only half believe because we began to believe too late. We believe with the mind, but not with the heart; our imaginations are not convinced of the spiritual realities to which we have given an intellectual assent less full and entire than if it had been earlier given. But if we believe with both mind and heart, with the assent of the reasoning powers and the consent of the imaginative faculties, it is impossible that we should not live as we both believe and feel; for belief and feeling are the only forces that can act on the will. Hence the importance of early faith, that it may be entire and strong, and that it may therefore bear its appropriate fruit in holy living, and in God's good time in holy dying. The production of this faith should be the foremost object of Sunday-School instruction.

In order to guide us in our methods, let us briefly consider the nature and grounds of religious belief. The first thing that strikes us here is the possibility of unbelief, on grounds that may not seem utterly unreasonable. Mathematical truth, from the simplest axioms to the most recondite theorems and formulas, does not admit of doubt, or of counter-argument. The man who should deny that two and two are four, or who — having once understood the steps of the demonstration — should deny that the square of the hypothenuse of a right-angled triangle is equal to the sum of the squares of the other two sides, would not be called a false reasoner, (for he could not have even the show of reason,) but simply insane or idiotic. Not so with religious truth. The Atheist, the Deist, the Rationalist, is not chargeable with insanity or idiocy. He is, as we think, a false reasoner; nevertheless he has his reasons, — insufficient in our esteem, yet real, not imaginary. His mind may be as strong and clear as that of the Christian believer. There are reasons both for and against every truth of religion, even both for and against that fundamental truth, the being of God. All reasoning on subjects of this class is a balancing of opposite arguments, — the mind giving its assent on one side or

the other according to the estimated weight of the respective arguments.

On these subjects priority of representation has a most momentous bearing on belief. It is almost impossible to subvert an established belief, especially if it be of such a nature that it can enter into the consciousness and become incorporated with the character. On the other hand, it is easy to disturb a new and untried belief, even by the merest sophistry. Take the case of one of those saintly women such as we have all known, who through a long life have fed upon the Divine Word, and have themselves been living gospels,—let loose upon such a one all the power of argumentative infidelity,—ply her with Renan upon Strauss, and Baden Powell upon Buckle,—she probably can answer very few of their arguments, and they will seem to her much more weighty than they are or ought to be to a theological scholar; but they will no more shake her faith than this morning's summer-breeze has shaken Wachusett and Monadnock. She knows in whom she has believed. Her whole experience has been a prolonged and reiterated proof of the Divine power and excellence of Christ and his Gospel. The rootlets of her faith are entwined with every fibre of her inward life. She has literally made it Christ to live; there is nothing in her or of her that is not the indwelling Christ,—so that to dislodge her Christian faith would be to crush her soul out of being. To take a different, yet not unlike case,—among those who cling with the utmost tenacity to the Divine element in the authorship of the Scriptures both Old and New, there are not a few who in point of biblical learning are immeasurably in advance of Colenso and the whole brood of sceptical and unbelieving critics,—who take full cognizance of all the sceptical literature of the day, yet whose faith remains unshaken, simply because through early study and research it was fortified by a dense array of affirmative arguments, which are not even touched by the reasonings of the opposite party. But let a man begin — as our theological students are apt to do—with Renan and Colenso, let him make his chief study of sceptical writers, with only now and then an incidental hour of reading on the other side,—he will have planted in his mind an invincible disbelief, so that he will be unable even to appreciate affirmative arguments.

These considerations indicate, as it seems to me, the proper course of Sunday-School instruction. Its aim should be to preoccupy the young mind by faith,—to sow “the seed of the kingdom”

before the enemy has time to come in and sow tares there. Above all, the Sunday-School teacher should take heed lest he be himself a sower of tares. I have known teachers, who, with the best design, but with a lamentable lack of wisdom, carried into their classes and discussed freely with their pupils the very doubts and difficulties that are exercising older minds and are rife in the community. I cannot believe that this method can have any good results. Many of the doubts are unanswerable, many of the difficulties unsolvable, simply because the materials for meeting them lie beyond our knowledge. They are to be overborne and outweighed rather than answered or solved; and it should be the teacher's endeavor to prepare his pupil to meet them by nurturing in him a faith which shall be its own evidence and argument. If you could directly answer all objections to the truths or the records of religion, it might be expedient for you to cover the whole ground in your instruction of the children and young persons under your charge. But we who have given our lifetime to the study of these themes, find ourselves unable fully to resolve doubts and to answer objections, because they relate to subjects on which human intelligence is necessarily very limited.

To illustrate this statement, I will take for my first instance that primal truth of revelation, God is Love. In antagonism to this, who can solve the complex problems presented by the existence of physical and moral evil, the former often unmerited, the latter often hereditary and therefore involuntary,—evil, too, that serves no visible purpose, and has no offset or compensation in this world,—evil without earthly remedy or hope? This whole night-side of Providence of itself might justly awaken scepticism and feed infidelity; and the wisest and most believing of us can give only tentative, partial, approximate solutions, which always resolve themselves into St. Paul's exclamation, "How unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out!" But these things do not disturb our faith, when we consider the immeasurable preponderance of beneficent plan, provision, causation and issue under the Divine administration, the boundless profusion of munificent love in all nature, being and experience, and the eternal life, in which through an omnipotent Providence, there is ample scope for evil to merge itself in good, for the very wrath of man to redound to the praise of God, and for sin — overcome and extinguished — to manifest in its history the wisdom, in its destruction the triumph, of redeeming love.

To take another instance, — let the miracles of the New Testament be placed before us simply as abnormal facts, interpolations in the order of nature, disturbing its regular sequences, setting its laws at defiance ; we might well find them stumbling-blocks in the way of our faith, and — reason about them as we may — they can never cease to be to us *miracles*, marvels, which — isolated — would provoke only scepticism. But when we become filled with the fulness of Christ, and find these miracles interwoven inextricably with the peerless beauty and glory of his life, pervaded by his spirit, recognized in his sublimest utterances, opening ever deeper views of the Divine Providence and the eternal life which he taught and manifested, so identified with his whole being, mission, teachings and activity, that to separate them from him is to quench the Son of Righteousness in our hearts, to dethrone him whom we cannot but own as our Lord, and to mutilate the charter of our forgiveness and hope, — then these wonderful works, with the grounds of scepticism unremoved, become objects of our undoubting and rejoicing faith.

Similar considerations apply to the Old Testament. There are many cavils at this primeval record which we have not the means of rebutting. It shows in some parts the lack of precision which belongs to an unhistorical age. There are many things in it, which could have their satisfactory solution only through a more intimate knowledge of remote antiquity than it is in our power to recover. There are portions which the ingenuity of subtle commentators only proves to be unintelligible, and from which we cannot hope that the veil will ever be lifted. Were this all, the Old Testament might be fittingly left in the disrepute into which it has fallen with not a few superficial thinkers and critics. But who can account, on any other theory than that of Divine inspiration, for the sublime theology which pervades those wonderful books from the beginning to the end ; for that Decalogue, so perfect that, when we regard it as a summary of human duty, we know not how either to add to it or to take from it ; for those humane precepts issuing, if not from God, from a horde of fugitive, more than semi-savage slaves ; for those unequaled strains of devotion struck from the lyre of a barbarous polygamist king ; for those lofty visions of prophecy, to rewrite which in history would be to make our world a heaven of peace, purity and righteousness ; — for this light of a lofty theistic faith, and a morality of which the Divine Redeemer could say, “I came not to destroy but to fulfil ” or verify it, shin-

ing out from a people of slender culture, while as to religion and ethics the advanced and cultivated nations sat in darkness and under the shadow of death, worshipping beasts, reptiles, leeks, blocks of stone, idealized vices, and satanic phantasies? When we take these things into the account, with all our difficulties unremoved, we find ourselves constrained to antedate Christianity, to hail the dawn and foreshining of the perfect day in long-antecedent ages, through patriarch, lawgiver and seer, to believe that God spake to the fathers by the prophets no less than to us by his Son.

Think not that I have lost sight of the purpose for which you have invited me hither. My object in this digression has been to indicate the kind of teaching which we should give, and the kind which we should not give, in our Sunday Schools. Let us now enter somewhat into detail as to the materials and spirit of our instruction.

First of all, teachers, seek to awaken in the hearts of your pupils a loving faith in God the Father. They are happy; make their gladness gratitude. They come to you from homes where they are tenderly cherished. Show them God as the sole source of the home-blessings of which their parents are the almoners,—as Him who has set the else solitary in families; who has kindled from his own love the love of father and of mother; whose tenderness and long-suffering are but faintly shadowed by theirs; who ever lives for them though earthly parents may die; who will take them up if father and mother forsake them.

They come to you on these bright summer Sundays. Like the Divine Teacher, draw your text from the birds of the air and the flowers of the field. Unfold to them the mysteries of joy that are around them in the songs of the woods and groves; in the hum and buzz of countless insects ever on the wing; in the gladsome gambols that ripple the lake and river; in the motherly care that broods as a perpetual providence over the helpless young of bird and beast; in the munificent provision for the needs of every form of sentient life; in the inscrutable instinct which for some stores up nutriment for barren winter, and drives others from zone to zone to find in their migrations perpetual spring. Show them too the exhaustless wonders of the vegetable creation,—the marvellous structure of the wayside flower; the Providence which ordains the winds of heaven as reapers and sowers of the seed which human hand neither gathers nor scatters; the beauty-loving, joy-breathing spirit which hangs the wild vine, gives the forest-trees their sym-

metry and grandeur, paints the lily's cup, loads the summer air with fragrance, elaborates beneath the snows and the frozen soil the fertilizing juices that in due time renew the face of the earth, and crown the year with verdure and glory.

The children come to you with fresh recollections and reminiscent outbreaks of their holiday sport. Exclude it not from the sacred place and hour. Rather hallow it; for God has hallowed it. Show them how their fingers are fitted to grasp the ball; their elastic limbs adapted to their vigorous contests in running, leaping and athletic games; their lungs—so large in proportion to their undeveloped frames—made capable of taking in more than their share of vitalizing and gladdening oxygen; the muscles of the face so organized as to find genial expression in the sunny smile and the merry laugh. Let them know and feel that the fountain of their joy is filled and kept full by Him who loves that his children should be happy. Thus associate God in their thoughts with all that makes them glad.

But forget not to teach them the law, no less than the love of God. Show them the ingratitude, and thus the exceeding sinfulness, of sin. They know what disobedience is in their homes, and their keenest remorse springs, not from the experience or the dread of punishment, but from the consciousness of their ingratitude, and their sense of a parent's wounded love. Employ in like manner the goodness of God to lead them to repentance. Make them feel that whatever is less than pervading gratitude is sin. Draw them by the cords of love to obedience and self-consecration. Seek to attach to the Father in heaven the very sentiments which constantly turn to, and rest upon, and spring from the filial relation in which most of them have so happy experience.

But, while love produces faith no less than faith works by love, beware of irreverence,—of over-familiar, flippant speech about the Supreme Being. I have sometimes, in Sunday-Schools, in both address and prayer, heard the Almighty spoken of and to in a style and tone altogether below that which we would assume in talking about or addressing a man whom we profoundly respected. You might sometimes infer from the mode of speech that the Supreme Being was familiarly and thoroughly known by the speaker, almost as neighbors know one another. Now in such representations immeasurably more than is gained in simplicity is lost in impressiveness. The child cannot profoundly venerate a being whom even his infant mind is taught that it can comprehend, and

whose name is lightly uttered, even though it be on sacred themes and occasions. No; let that name be uttered with awe no less than with love. Nay, let us even learn something from the reverent silence of the Hebrews, who, though they write, never speak the name of Jehovah. Let the utterance, though not as in their case superstitiously suppressed, never be needlessly multiplied, I would say, not even in prayer. Let the child be taught to feel that, while on the one side of fatherly love the Divine majesty lets itself down to his feeble apprehension, in all other dimensions and aspects it presents heights and depths, and in this too a fulness and wealth, conversance with which "demands and crowns eternity."

I want to dwell with emphasis on this point, because I believe that the well-meant irreverence of religious teaching is fatal to an enduring faith in God. The idea which seems to the child's mind full, complete and adequate, he outgrows and looks down upon with advancing years; while if, on the one hand, he is taught to associate all the beauty of creation and all the joy of life with the love of God, and, on the other hand, is made to feel, "Lo! these are a part of His ways, but how little a portion is known of him!" — the conception will grow with his growth, strengthen with his strength, deepen with his experience, ever filling, yet ever transcending his apprehensive powers, and blending lowly awe with filial love.

Parallel with this loving, yet reverent instruction concerning the Supreme Being should be the earnest endeavor to plant in the child's mind faith in Christ. If you do not believe in the very Christ of the gospel narratives; if your Christ is a marred and distorted caricature of the Christ of the evangelists, a conception of your own, another being than that recognized by the whole Church as the Sent of God and the Saviour of men, — you have no rightful place in the Sunday School. Our churches are organized on the basis of the Gospel of eighteen centuries ago, not on any brand-new gospel of to-day. But if you believe in the veritable Christ of the evangelists, teach his whole history as if you believed it all. Present him to your pupils in his divine and human relations; in all his loveliness and beauty; in those mighty works in which he is the power of God; in those doctrines and precepts in which he is the wisdom of God; in that life spent in doing good, and that death for man's redemption, in which he is the love of God; in that glorious resurrection in which he reveals immortality; in that ascension in which he marks in living light the way to heaven.

Show your pupils the excellence of Christ's teachings and spirit, where they are opposed to the way of the world,—the greatness of humility, the kindly working of a forgiving temper, the blessedness of doing to others as we would have them do to us. Apply these precepts to the occasions—in outward seeming trivial, to them momentous—on which they may make trial of their Saviour's words, and learn from experience how wise and good they are. Make yourselves conversant with their peculiar temptations and trials, and help them to ask and answer the question, "What would Jesus, the sinless child, have been, or said, or done, under like circumstances?"

Content not yourselves with the scraps and shreds of the sacred record which your pupils may commit as the minimum answers to the questions in their manuals. Let them deposit in their memory the Saviour's very words,—the parables, the Sermon on the Mount, the discourses at the paschal table. Memory can have no treasure half so precious; and, committed early, it will be a life-long treasure,—nay more, in the Master's own expressive figure, it will be within them "a well of water springing up unto everlasting life."

Teach the gospels, if you so believe them, as you would teach geography or astronomy, not with qualification or apology, as if they were hard to be believed, or liable to doubt. Discuss not with your pupils sceptical theories in which you yourselves have no confidence. You may indeed answer the doubts suggested to your own satisfaction; but you will have taught them to doubt before they have learned to believe. Accustom them, however, to talk freely with you; and if doubts spring up within their own minds, (which is not likely to be the case,) or are suggested from without, (as they may be, and, I am sorry to say, even from the pulpit,) then meet them to the best of your ability, by sound reasoning, and yet more, by what will generally have still greater weight,—the utterance of your own firm and hearty faith.

Endeavor not only to teach them about Christ, but to make them Christians in spirit and in life, and you will have done immeasurably more for their faith, than by the most learned and able refutation of all the objections and cavils that unbelievers ever have urged or ever will or can urge. A Christ within is not easily dislodged. Christian consciousness is an armor of proof against all adverse influences. Your pupils may encounter scepticism in after life; but its power over their minds will depend, not on their

capacity to meet argument by argument, but on the strength of their antecedent faith. If Christ and his Gospel have no strong hold on their hearts, they will listen readily to doubt and unbelief. If they have learned to love Christ and follow him, their sufficient answer will be that of Peter, "Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life."

I come now to the use of the Old Testament in the instruction of the young. Here the materials are rich and inestimably precious; but they require a cautious and discriminating use. There are narrative portions, of value to older minds, unfolding profoundly instructive chapters of the providential history of primeval man and of the covenant people, which yet contain no lessons that can be made directly profitable to children. There are details of the Mosaic ritual, which on investigation reveal more and more of the Divine wisdom in fencing the Hebrews against the idolatries and vices of surrounding nations, but which, were they availings for juvenile instruction, require a larger apparatus of illustration than is often within the reach of any but professed theologians. There are records of depravity, which are of priceless value as way-marks in the progress of mankind, and as attestations of the need of Divine interposition to raise from its fallen state a race that had lost the power of self-redemption; but these narratives, though they are almost always striking examples of God's retributive providence, are not adapted to the edification of the very young.

Yet, while what is obscure or easily liable to abuse may be shunned, how much is there, which is not only intensely interesting to the young and curious mind, but is adapted to illustrate and enforce by example the very maxims of ethical truth and duty which fell from the lips and were incarnated in the life of Jesus! In my boyhood well-nurtured children found ample and rich pastureage in these Hebrew Scriptures,—not, indeed, turned into them to graze at random, but led by the home-shepherdess, (whose work the under-shepherds should help, not supersede,) where the sweetest pastures grow, though often close under the shadow of those cliffs and crags in which are the hidings of the Divine counsels,—inaccessible mysteries,—holy words that pulse in magnificent rhythm upon the ear, yet veil instead of revealing their thought.

The Old Testament biography has a perennial charm for those who have become interested in it. What a portrait gallery have we there, of worthies, for the least of whom, till Christ came, not a peer could be found out of Judea!—Abraham, the sublime old

patriarch, talking with the angels on the plain of Mamre; Joseph, alike in the prison and near the throne,

*"Faithful found,
Among the faithless faithful only he";*

Moses, the mirror of patriotism, the father of an emancipated nation; Job, the loyal vindicator of the ways of Providence in sackcloth, penury and contempt; Daniel, true to the God of his fathers under the ban of a relentless despotism; and a multitude beside, the lustre of whose virtue is not eclipsed, nor the aroma of their piety exhaled, by the lapse of uncounted ages, or the revolutions that have passed over their birthland, but who shine and will shine on as stars in the spiritual firmament forever and ever.

Then too, in the religious culture of the taste and the imagination, where can you find such a manual as we have in the Psalms, in Job, in Isaiah, in that glorious anthem of Habakkuk, in Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the Temple? Where else does nature pour forth so deep and rich a voice? Where else are the "signs and wonders of the elements" so sublime in their utterance of praise? Where else are we so brought into communion with the incorruptible Spirit that is in all things, and made so to feel the indwelling presence of the Almighty in every work of his power? Where else do the floods clap their hands, the hills rejoice, the forests wave in praise, the rain confess its Father, the vernal bloom own the all-renovating fiat, till, as we read,

*"The dilating soul, enrapt,
Transfused, into the mighty vision passing,
As in her natural form, swells vast to heaven? "*

Your pupils may encounter scepticism in its more subtle and in its coarser forms, as to these ancient records, and it will be impossible for you to anticipate doubt and cavil by any array of direct instruction and argument; but if you give them large and judiciously directed converse with these writings, the books themselves will be their own defence. Their readers will have in their own hearts ample testimony to the Divine element in their authorship.

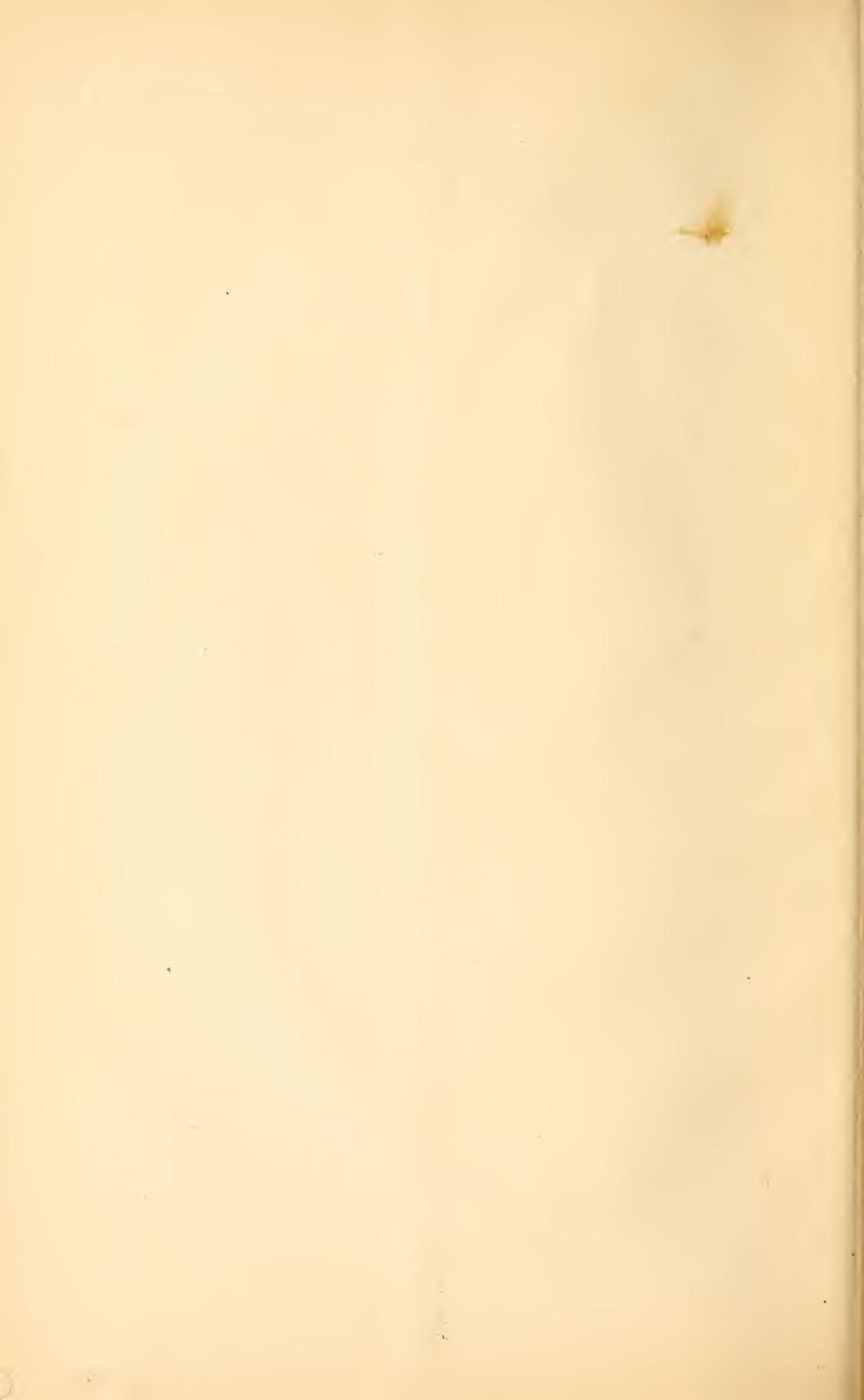
I have thus given you some of the methods, by which the Sunday-School teacher may plant and cherish faith in the young mind and heart, and may anticipate and avert the sceptical tendencies to which his pupils may be exposed in after life. But there is one instrumentality, I will not say more potent than all others, but I will say emphatically, without which all others will have little

weight,—without which all other modes of instruction are more likely than not to be feeble and inefficient, misguided and unwise. I mean the instruction of personal character, example and influence. “For their sakes,” said the Saviour, “I sanctify myself”; and these words of his should be the motto of every one who presumes to stand in his stead, and to feed the sheep or the lambs as his under-shepherd. I do not say that you should wait for the ripened maturity of the Christian character before you take your places as teachers. Did you wait for this, you might never feel yourselves worthy; for humility grows at least as rapidly as any other Christian virtue, and the nearer we approach our Saviour, the more does the lustre of the Sun of Righteousness dim the feeble shining of our lesser lamps. But the Christian teacher ought, at least, to have for the basis of his own culture the Christian aim, purpose and endeavor,—the settled determination to be a follower of the Lord.

A holy life has in all times been the best argument for our religion. It is emphatically so with children and youth. To give effect to your instructions, you must be what you teach. Your pupils must feel that you hold as inestimably precious the Gospel from which you give them lessons,—the Saviour whom you commend to their imitation, obedience and confidence. Your levity or irreverence, your indifference to the worship and ordinances of religion, your disloyalty to any known duty, your sins of temper, your offences against brotherly love, your marked deficiencies in Christian character, will awaken vague distrust in the truths you teach. On the other hand, whatever of the beauty of holiness your pupils behold in your lives will win their hearts for the Saviour of whom you have learned how to live. Let them see in you the blended beauty and strength of Christian manhood, the delicate, gentle, winning graces of Christian womanhood,—they will be drawn in strong sympathy and tender love to you, and through you to him at whose feet you sit, and whose spirit you breathe.

Teachers, in conclusion, let me bid you Godspeed in your sacred work. Pursue it in faith and love, and God's blessing shall attend or follow it. Be not discouraged, though you see not immediate results. “The husbandman waiteth for the precious fruit of the earth, and hath long patience, until he receive the early and latter rain. Be ye also patient.” You may not be able to trace your work to its happy issue. But in heaven each husbandman will know his own sheaves. Believe that for all your diligent and lov-

ing labor in the Lord's harvest-field there awaits you a blessed recognition in the ingathering of redeemed souls. There you will find children of your faith and your adoption, bound to you by ties of eternal benefit, who will say to you, "You helped us hither; you shone as a light upon our path; your instructions were the life of our souls; your example brought us to the Saviour." Teachers, may this be the reward and blessedness of all of you in the resurrection of the just!







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